



[G W F Hegel 1770 - 1831](#)

Hegel

[George William Frederick Hegel](#) (1770-1831) [Image: Hegel with his students] was not just somebody whose theories were surpassed by those of Marx and Engels, nor was he merely a John the Baptist to Karl Marx's Christ. Hegel was an original, with an indelible part in the development of human thought, that is inseparable from Marx's contribution.

Engels in his short "[Ludwig Feuerbach, Part 1 - Hegel](#)" (linked below) writes that the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 were each preceded by uproar in the field of philosophy; but there were differences.

Whereas the French philosophers had been banned and proscribed, Hegel had advanced in "*a triumphant procession which lasted for decades*" at times with "*the rank of a royal*

Prussian philosophy of state". Even in the decade following Hegel's death, until the lectures of Schelling in 1841 which Engels (aged 21) attended, *"Hegelianism' reigned most exclusively."* This was the ground in which Marxism grew, and this is what Engels is describing in the main linked text.

One of our CU correspondents has written to say that it is unfair to lay the blame for "mechanical materialism" at Engels' door. This is true, but the unfairness does not arise from prejudice. It arises because of Engels' ambiguous semi-filial relationship with Hegel, which causes Engels to defend Hegel, while at the same time strongly repudiating some aspects of Hegel's work.

For us who are far less familiar with Hegel than were Engels and his contemporaries, the simultaneous defence and attack can appear self-contradictory, or worse. Stripped from the tactical context, some of Engels' words may appear to lend support to absolute "mechanical materialism".

Circumstances, and tactics responding to circumstances, played a part. Engels says: *"At that time politics was a very thorny field, and hence the main fight came to be directed against religion; this fight, particularly since 1840, was indirectly also political."*

This proxy role played in politics by religion in 1840s Germany is the reason for the apparent elevation of the dichotomy of idealism and materialism, which later writers, out of context, have somehow tended to treat like a sort of "Rosetta Stone" of

Marxism, as if the ideal/material dichotomy explains everything, when by itself it explains nothing.

The question of what, if anything, was really discarded by Marx and Engels from Hegel is one we may look at again later in this series. Lenin wrote: *“It is impossible completely to understand Marx's Capital, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's Logic. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!”*

Clearly, Lenin did not think of Hegel as being redundant, or superseded.

Evidence of Engels’ and Marx’s debt to Hegel is found in the works themselves, which are saturated with Hegelian method, as Ilyenkov points out [in his work on Capital](#).

A good place to start learning about Hegel is Andy Blunden’s [Getting to know Hegel](#), which is in turn part of Andy’s great resource called [Hegel by Hypertext](#).

But first, the short Part 1 of Hegel’s Ludwig Feuerbach explains a lot.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Feuerbach and the end of German Philosophy, 1886, Engels](#).
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